

NEIL DARRAGH discusses why our images of God need to change as we grow in awareness of our relationships and responsibilities in Earth.

It has taken me several decades to recognise the truth of the old theological saying that all our images of God are more wrong than right. Our minds and hearts are just not smart enough to absorb any more than little glimpses of what God means. We need to be continually discarding old, dysfunctional ways of thinking about God and discovering new, more creative ones. Alternatively, our images of God just fade away from sheer dullness. Some of our images are just leftovers from childhood. They keep our religion infantile and they are dysfunctional for adult living. But whether our images of God are right, wrong, distorted, or just dull, they do still affect our behaviour. Our images of God have consequences for how we behave.

Reworking Our Images of God

When it became obvious a few decades ago that our relationships with the rest of the Earth were more like those of vandals than of family members in our common home, many of us had to rethink our images of God. Some of these images were too human-centred, even self-centred, to be realistic and healthy.

Fortunately we've been shocked out of the lazy personalism that had taken hold of our theology. By "personalism" I mean a spirituality or theology that reduces our understanding of God to a very personal relationship with me, to my personal growth in holiness. The image of God that I, and many people like me, were holding on to was focused too narrowly on God as my own personal saviour, a friendly companion, a kind supervisor perhaps, or a loving mother. I've heard more homilies than I need recently



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which image God as all-loving and all forgiving towards us human beings. God, it would seem, is a God of "unconditional love".

Like most of the things we can say about God, it is a half-truth. There is a deep sense in which the divine energy is always within us – in that sense "unconditional". But that divine love never overpowers us. It is never forced on us. It can be obstructed by our attitudes and actions – it is "conditional" on our being in tune with it, open to its creative power. Can we suppose that God's love stays alive and active within us no matter what we do – even if we live like vandals, polluters and over-consumers?

There is nothing wrong, of course, with maintaining an image of God who loves us personally. It is better, at least, than the image of a God, familiar to our forebears, who favours hard work and progress and has delivered the rest of the planet into human hands as raw material to do with as we please. These images are not entirely

wrong, but they are too narrow and too dangerous for other beings that have to live with us. The image of a compassionate God is an image that Jesus Christ endeavoured to plant deep in the hearts of his own people in place of images of king, warrior, judge or lawmaker. Yet this is a love not personalised to within ourselves but an expansive love that reaches out to the whole of God's creation.

Reviving a Healthy Agnosticism

Our understanding of God, if we get it right, is a driving power for creative action in our world. Yet there has always been a strong agnostic theme in Christian theology. And right now I think we still need a healthy dose of agnosticism. We become agnostic when we say "I don't know" in places where we thought we knew a lot and acted as if we knew a lot.

The rather sudden realisation towards the end of the last century that we were doing a lot of damage to Earth came as something of a



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shock to our confident theology, not to mention our confident science. A healthy agnosticism is a continuous process. The “I don’t know” response to the question of who God is or where we can find God or whether we believe in whoever God is, does not mean just stopping there, lazy and self-indulgent. It means reworking our images of God and searching for new healthy and creative ones.

One of the ways of reworking and revitalising our images of God is to pay more attention to our non-human companions which support us, interact with us, journey with us and are loved with us by the One who creates and sustains us all.

Attending to Symbols of God

Our senses, not just our minds, are a rich source of understanding the nature of God. We may call these things the “symbols” of God. By “symbol” I mean a thing, an action, or an event which shows us something of the Divine. Among these symbols are “natural”


symbols—symbols that originate in nature, in the non-human world.

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A few years ago I was leading seminars which focused on Christian symbols. I asked participants to name their most important symbols of God. Some of the named symbols came from human actions and familiar church liturgies. But the majority originated in the non-human world around us, such as particular trees, fresh water, sea, sun, wide-open spaces, seaside, particular stars, birds, particular kinds of flowers, light, sky, wind, landscape, mountain, flowing water, a flame. “The sky shows me

and reminds me of the vastness and infinity of God.” “A pond with bulrushes and water lilies is a symbol to me of God’s peace.” “Two trees in particular show me the strength and beauty of the divine— God giving life and peace with patience.”

The symbols named above are *visual* (from our sense of sight), but other symbols people named were *aural* (from our sense of hearing): flowing water, the silence of an empty room, the wind in trees, the sound of the ocean. “I see and hear the awesomeness of God in the strength and power of the sea; it shows a God always giving; my feeling is one of awe, wonder, a sense of mystery.” “Empty rooms, their silence, show me a God present everywhere.” Other symbols of God were predominantly to do with the sense of touch: the feel of the wind, the touch of a friendly animal, the sun’s rays, flowing water. “God holding my whole body, sustaining me.” “The unseen presence of God whom I cannot see yet cannot live without.”

The symbols named here are relatively simple. We should not stop there. A next step is to attend to the more complex and dangerous images of God that present themselves to us as we pay more attention to the presence of God in the Earth. Rivers, hurricanes, earthquakes, bush fires, and oceans are more complex and intense natural images of God that may take us to places we would rather not go. They are the next obvious step though in reviving and energising our images of God so that we move beyond the consoling images of a personal God or the harsh confinement of a God of Progress. Today’s new ventures in sustainable living within the Earth are not just practical ways of avoiding extinction, they are also adventures into the incredible life of God. 



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